

Gender Performativity, Queer Sexualities and Fictional Representation in Selected Short Stories from Malawi and Uganda

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Abstract

This article examines characterisation and symbolism as narrative strategies that challenge anti-LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) cultures in four short stories – Stanley Kenani’s “Love on Trial” and “In the Best Interests of the Child”, Monica Arac de Nyeko’s “Jambula Tree” and Beatrice Lamwaka’s “Chief of the Home”. The main thrust of the article is that gender as represented in these works of fiction does not conform to the hegemonic social binaries prevalent in Malawi and Uganda, the national contexts for these stories. Instead, it is performative rather than fixed, and more fluid than hegemonic conceptions would have it. Using the Butlerian notion of gender performativity, this article demonstrates how the aforementioned narrative strategies are used to critique cultures (and other social establishments such as laws and religions) that are eventually liable for the prevalent homophobic attitudes towards LGBTI, particularly homosexuality and lesbianism. The article reads the selected stories in ways that help challenge widespread and entrenched bigotry regarding alternative sexualities.

Keywords:

queer sexualities,
gender performativity,
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strategies

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Introduction

This article critically examines the representation of gender and sexuality in Stanley Kenani’s “Love on Trial” and “In the Best Interests of the Child”, Monica Arac de Nyeko’s “Jambula Tree” and Beatrice Lamwaka’s “Chief of the Home”. The article argues that these stories represent gender and alternative sexualities in ways that challenge heteronormativity and homophobia in African cultures through defiant characters, and body and fruit symbols. The article discusses

how people's beliefs in heteronormative societies facilitate homophobia or anti-LGBTI sentiments. It further investigates how the stories respond to compulsory heterosexuality. In my argument, there are three concerned parties: queer characters represented in the literature, homophobic African societies that they inhabit, and the writer as the one responsible for the representation. The study looks at the cause of tension between the homosexuals or transgender individuals and the societies in which they live. Within the African societies represented in the four short stories, there are multiple and largely contradicting narratives on homosexuality (Lipenga, 2014). Apart from multiple voices as a narrative strategy for capturing different views on homosexuality and lesbianism, such views are also captured through characterisation and symbolism as my article intends to illustrate.

“Love on Trial” and “In the Best Interests of the Child” are from Kenani's collection of stories titled *For Honour and Other Short Stories* (2011). “Jambula Tree” by Monica Arac de Nyeko and Beatrice Lamwaka's “Chief of the Home” are found in *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction* (2013), compiled and edited by Karen Martin and Makhosaza Xaba. The selection of the authors is due to their bravery to write on a topic that is considered culturally alien, religiously abhorrent and legally criminal in both Malawi and Uganda. In Malawi, homosexuality is punishable by up to 14 years imprisonment besides the general homophobia that LGBTI people face every day. Likewise, in Uganda heteronormative communities are often hostile to sexual minorities and government machinery often facilitates homophobia through policing and suppression of homoerotic desire. With regard to the selected stories, it is the representation of LGBTI as a challenge to heteronormativity that is of interest in this article. In my analysis, I employ Judith Butler's gender performativity, which among other issues, argues that cultures deceive people to regard alternative sexualities as alien and abnormal.

Butler's Gender Performativity

The Butlerian notion of gender performativity has, over the years, been an important lens through which discourses on sexuality and gender are interrogated. Butler's work, especially *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), is often

referenced in scholarship on the notion of gender performativity. The theory of gender performativity claims that dominant cultures blindfold people to think of heterosexuality as the only 'normative sexuality'. Butler (1990) argues that heteronormativity facilitates "the compulsory order of sex, gender or desire" (p.5). She further contends that "assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of 'men' will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that 'women' will interpret only female bodies" (p.9). These remarks indicate that a neat matching of gender with sex is problematic. Butler rejects the belief that sex or gender is stable. She regards "gender as a multiple interpretation of sex" (1990, p.8). It is as a result of gender being 'a multiple interpretation of sex' that has led to denigration of queers in socio-cultural contexts universally (Butler 1990).

The notion of gender performativity originates from the global North. I am aware that using theoretical frameworks developed in the global North to analyse discourses in the global South may sometimes be problematic. However, I draw on Tamale's (2011) argument to justify my use of Butler. In her article, "Researching and theorizing sexualities in Africa", Tamale argues that "though it is extremely important to develop home-grown theories of African sexualities and to be keenly aware always of the dangers of uncritically using theories that are constructed from the global North to explain African societies, Western views on sexuality cannot be completely ignored" (2011a, p.39). To me, Butler's notion of gender performativity provides a frame for reading the selected texts, particularly Butler's challenge of the claim that construction of men or women will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or females. To borrow Tamale's words, the Butlerian notion of gender performativity is "extremely useful in analysing sexualities in Africa, as long as this is done with the continental specificities in mind" (Tamale, 2011a, p.40).

Defiant Characters in Heteronormative Cultural Contexts

Cultures of representation, including fiction, have attempted to capture the sex-gender problem in African socio-cultural contexts. African writers have not only responded to homophobia that is facilitated by the supposed 'normal'

heterosexual regime but have also attempted to fault the pretexts on which the homophobia is founded. In *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa*, Epprecht (2013) criticises the social injustices that people with sexualities other than heterosexuality face in Africa. He comments on the representation of African alternative sexualities in international media as being too marginal and understood out of the African context. He further comments on literary texts such as Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* as being thought-provoking on social injustices faced by LGBTI community in Africa. Likewise, Stanley Kenani, Monica Arac de Nyeko and Beatrice Lamwaka have, in their literary works, faulted African cultures that condone social injustices towards people with alternative sexualities. Across the four stories, the fashion of representation gears towards the same quest: challenging cultural heteronormativity through characters that protest the suppression of homoerotic desires.

“Love on Trial” is a humorous story told mainly from the perspective of an opportunist village drunk, Mr Lapani Kachingwe and the protagonist, Charles Chikwanje. In the story, Chikwanje is supposedly caught red-handed with his undisclosed homosexual partner in a pit latrine at Chipiri Primary School. The events that follow centre on people's interest to know how possible it is “to have sex between two men and who, in the process, was *performing* the functions of the man and who was the woman” (Kenani, 2011, pp.11-12, emphasis added). The story is often seen as the fictionalised version of actual events that happened in Malawi when two men, Steven Monjeza and Tiwonge Chimbalanga, were arrested in December 2009 after their public engagement ceremony. In an attempt to capture the real-life situation, Kenani “does not paint a black and white picture of pro or anti-homosexual opinion. Instead, his style in crafting the story is a subtle and teasing method of using multiple narrative voices to create a single story” (Lipenga, 2014, p.46). Through the voice of Charles, for example, in an interview with Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) on the ‘pit latrine scandal’, his characterisation challenges the compulsory order of sexuality. Thus, beneath Charles’ narrative voice lies his subtle defiance of socio-cultural constructions of sexuality.

Charles is labelled as a 'lost sheep' by the conservative and homophobic Chipiri society. He becomes a cultural rebel, someone who has departed from the ways of his society's cultural norms regarding gender and sexuality. In an interview on BBC's Focus on Africa, Charles is "unrepentant, even proud of what he called 'having come out in the open'" (Kenani, 2011, p.14). Kenani uses the character of Charles to defy homophobic tendencies in Chipiri.

Mr Lapani Kachingwe's characterisation stands in contrast to that of Charles. Apart from using Charles' story to lure his buddies to buy him alcohol, Mr Kachingwe uses the story to emphasize the influence of cultural norms on gender and sexuality in Chipiri. Read using the Butlerian idea of gender performativity, the character of Mr Kachingwe signifies heteronormative values that seek to uphold the supremacy and legality of heterosexuality over other sexualities. However, Mr Kachingwe's story is somehow unreliable for he was drunk at the time he claims to have witnessed the event and could not remember the precise details of the incident. In fact, "in truth, nobody ever finds out what the strands of those details are in Mr Kachingwe's story" (Kenani, 2011, p.11).

During the earlier noted interview with MBC, the crowd roars "*Wamathanyula! Homosexual!*" (Kenani, 2011, p.16) to mock Charles. This is an open act of homophobia caught live on national television. Members of the Chipiri society cite culture as a justification for their homophobia. When foreign donors react to Charles's arrest a government official in the story defends the arrest and asserts that "we will not be held to ransom by aid. We view this donor reaction as an affront to the dignity of our nation. Malawi is a sovereign state. Let them keep their aid, and we will keep our religious and *cultural values*." (Kenani, 2011, p.23 with emphasis). Again, culture here is used to justify homophobia.

In the introduction to *African Sexualities: A Reader*, Tamale (2011b) posits that "ideas about and experiences of African sexualities are shaped and defined by issues such as colonialism" (p.2). In "Love on Trial", the Chipiri community castigates Charles because they hold the view that what Charles has done is contrary to their cultural norms. However, it is debatable to say whether the people of Chipiri

already had homophobic attitudes towards homosexuality before colonialism. Studies such as Hawley (2017), Matebeni and Pereira (2014), Zabus (2013) and Msibi (2011) engage the claim that homosexuality is alien in Africa. Many of these studies found historical evidence which strongly suggests that same-sex desires have existed in Africa even before colonialism. Most of the same-sex acts at the time were associated with witchcraft and boosting physical power for men (Bertolt, 2019; Msibi, 2011). These homophobic attitudes were only entrenched by colonial laws which criminalised homosexuality.

Kenani's "In the Best Interests of the Child" has not attracted a lot of critical attention compared to "Love on Trial". The story is also based on actual events surrounding the adoption of children, David Banda and Mercy James, from Malawi by American popstar, Madonna. The Malawian society responded to the issue with mixed reactions with some wanting to block the adoptions through the courts. In the story, the adoption of Dorothy, who is motherless is met with fierce resistance from the general public because Sister Fire, the lady who wants to adopt the children, is a lesbian. Sister Fire is therefore Madonna's fictional analogue. In this story, Kenani develops characters that forego cultural determination on sexuality and gender. Butler (1990) argues that the problem with falsified gender norms and sexuality conformities is that they do not eventually stand ground in the whole society. Gender and sexuality always find their way to deviate from the populace suppositions (Butler, 1993). The character of Sister Fire, as defended by Peter Sitolo in the story, defies the compulsory order of sexuality, which seems to portray alternative sexualities as less human.

The characterisation of Peter Sitolo, the custodian of Dorothy, counters cultures that shape people's negative view of alternative sexualities such as lesbianism. The heterosexual populace of Chipiri justifies its homophobic stance on Sister Fire based on culture. Mwakasungula (2013) notes that "culture runs so deep in Malawi. Most people who opposed homosexuality during the constitutional review process argued on the basis of [...] culture, saying homosexuality is against Malawi's cultural values and norms" (p.366). To counter the populace's opposition

to lesbianism, Kenani uses the tolerant character of Peter Sitolo. Peter Sitolo is represented as an ally of alternative sexualities. Kenani portrays Peter Sitolo as an accepting person who does not listen to what people say about Sister Fire. By doing so, Kenani suggests that not all people in African cultures in general and Malawian cultures in particular are homophobic.

As a character, Peter Sitolo challenges the hegemonic and heteronormative conceptions that everyone in Africa is against alternative sexualities. Although Sister Fire is a lesbian, Peter Sitolo indicates that he has no problem with her sexual orientation and makes it clear that what he wants is to save the life of Dorothy. Dorothy's life is in danger because her mother died soon after Dorothy's birth and Peter Sitolo cannot afford formula to feed the baby. Nevertheless, the general opinion and that of government agents in the story is that a child cannot be properly raised by lesbian parents. They argue that "the little girl will have her morality corrupted" (Kenani, 2011, p.122), thereby associating lesbianism with immorality.

The views of the people of Chipiri do not differ from those of Mama Atim in de Nyeko's "Jambula Tree". Winner of the 2007 Caine Prize for African Writing, de Nyeko's story is an epistolary piece that explores 'forbidden' sexual desire between Anyango and Sanyu. Just like Kenani, de Nyeko comes from a country, Uganda, where alternative sexualities are despised by local cultures and repressed by law. When Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni signed into law the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014, homoerotic relationships were already banned through sodomy laws enacted during colonialism (Fallon, 2014). Interestingly, Uganda's Penal Code prescribes a minimum of 14 years in prison for homosexual acts just like in Malawi. Both Uganda and Malawi are former British colonies. The similarity between the two countries regarding the law on alternative sexualities is more than mere coincidence. It speaks of the two countries' shared colonial history which has to some extent influenced the two countries' stance on homoerotic desires.

In the story, Anyango, who lives in estate housing in Uganda's capital Kampala

writes to her partner, Sanyu, who is studying in London. Despite the restrictions arising from their culture which suppresses homoerotic desire, Anyango and Sanyu are attracted to each other sexually. Sanyu is subsequently forced by her parents to go to London for further studies. De Nyeko has developed her characters in “Jambula Tree” in a way that challenges homophobia and its cultural pretexts

Mama Atim is one of the interesting characters that foster homophobia in the story. She is presented as an antagonist to the protagonists Anyango and Sanyu. Mama Atim is a very observant woman, a custodian of heteronormativity as well as patriarchy. She watches over the society’s culture by criticising what she suspects to be immoral or ‘queer’. On the other hand, the lesbian characters (Anyango and Sanyu) are portrayed as uncultured young girls because they express love for each other. They rebel (albeit subtly) against dictates of their culture with regard to sexual feelings. The subtle rebellion comes out in the letter when Anyango writes that:

We said that after that night. The one night no one could make us forget. You left without saying goodbye after that. You had to, I reasoned. Perhaps it was good for both of us. Maybe things could die down that way. Things never did die down. Our names became forever associated with the forbidden (de Nyeko, 2013, p.9).

Through Anyango’s claim quoted above that “things never did die down” despite her partner Sanyu being sent to London, we encounter a character who emphasizes that the feelings between the two are too strong to be doused by society’s intervention. The society’s reaction to Anyango’s and Sanyu’s love affair shows the perception of alternative sexualities as temporary deviations from heterosexuality that could be corrected. However, as Butler (1990) argues, heterosexuality is also a performance that is socially construed. The taboos that the heteronormative societies put on alternative sexualities are the ones that stir homophobia. De Nyeko challenges homophobia, especially as displayed by Mama Atim, by developing the two lesbian lovers as cultural rebels just like Charles in Kenani’s “Love on Trial”. Mama Atim holds the view that lesbianism is un-African and should never be

entertained within her society or indeed anywhere else by indicating that “London is no refuge for the immoral” (de Nyeko, 2013, p.12), in reference to Sanyu being sent to London. However, as we saw in Kenani’s “In the Best Interests of the Child”, Sister Fire, a lesbian pop star, comes from the very same former colonial power spaces that Mama Atim describes as intolerant to homosexuality.

From what Anyango recalls, Mama Atim deliberately scares her to abandon her lesbian desires. She recalls that Mama Atim “wants me to hear the word [that lesbianism is an abomination] in every breath, sniff it in every scent so it can haunt me like that day I first touched you” (de Nyeko, 2013, p.12). Mama Atim sends a homophobic message that intends to echo in Anyango’s ears that her sexual orientation is uncultured and must be abandoned. The cultural argument posited in “Jambula Tree” is that a normal sex relationship is only that between a man and a woman. Thus, culture makes Mama Atim regard heterosexuality as the only normal sexual orientation.

Anyango and Sanyu engage in what is regarded as ‘abnormal’ within the fictive Ugandan socio-cultural context which is predominantly a heteronormative and patriarchal society. The enforcement of heteronormativity cannot be conceived outside the force of patriarchy. In “Jambula Tree”, women such as Mama Atim are agents of the very systems that suppress their freedom and being. Mama Atim safeguards a culture in which she herself is a victim. Instead of fighting the patriarchal dictates on sexuality and gender, Mama Atim, through her hostility towards the two lesbian girls, advances homophobia that manifests in heteronormative practices that are in turn sustained through patriarchy. While in Kenani’s story society is a bit tolerant of Charles’s sexuality, in “Jambula Tree” cultural authority over the girls’ sexuality comes with an iron fist. Unlike Charles, who becomes an object of humour in society, Sanyu is immediately sent away from her lesbian partner on the pretext of further studies. In Beatrice Lamwaka’s “Chief of the Home”, which I now turn to, we encounter Lugul, a male intersex character, who, like Charles, is entertained in his society despite his ‘queer’ sexuality and ‘abnormal’ gender role.

Beatrice Lamwaka's "Chief of the Home" is another story in which heteronormativity is faulted based on prevailing cultural norms in the society. The story is about a "female-behaving" young man, Lugul, who wanders from town to town helping people. The narrator takes us to the Alokolum village in northern Uganda. The story surrounds the fate of Lugul, whose origins are shrouded in mystery. The narrator decides to tell us Lugul's story because it "deserves to be heard" (Lamwaka, 2013, p. 159). Mtenje (2016) observes that "Lamwaka's focus on a transgender fictional character is a transgressive decision, addressing a form of fluid *gender* identification" (p.269, emphasis original). There is slight error in Mtenje's reference to Lugul's orientation as transgender. Being transgender entails making a conscious decision to change one's identification from one gender identity category to another. This is not entirely the case with Lugul. He performs femininity unconscious of the demands of his assigned gender at birth. Yet, both transgender and intersex are suppressed by patriarchal contexts where most of things are either masculine or feminine. The cultural norms in Lugul's society dictate whether he be conferred the attributes of a man or a woman. As an intersex individual, the society struggles to assign a "proper" gender to Lugul.

Silence is the strongest trait in Lugul's character. Lugul "didn't say anything when one man, drunk with arege, said 'Lugulobedodako ma lacoo', Lugul is a woman man" (Lamwaka, 2013, p.162). The silence may be due to the position that Lugul occupies in his society as a result of his gendered social practices. At the heart of the story is the question of how far a society should go in determining one's gender, and the performance that is to go along with it. Lugul is characterised as a "woman man" because his social practices are of a female. He cooks. He fetches firewood. In other words, Lugul is perceived as feminine rather than masculine as a result of society's definition of masculinity. However, as noted by Connell, "masculinity refers to male bodies but it is not determined by male biology" (2010, p.2). This means that bodies that are described as masculine are not necessarily those of males (de Larch, 2017; Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998).

Although Lugul has a male body, it is not conclusive that he is masculine.

To borrow Connell's words, "it is, thus, perfectly logical to talk about 'masculine' women, when women behave or present themselves in a way their society regards as distinctive of men" (2010, p.2). What Lugul exhibits are instances of gender performativity that have no consequences on his sexuality. Biologically, Lugul is regarded as male yet the society fails to recognise his masculinity. This observation resonates with what Butler describes as unconscious performative acts of gender. Some members of the heterosexual society deliberately foster heteronormativity for the sake of their cultures. For example, when Lugul dies, the narrator tells us that

my father said he would give you a home where you will rest. He said you were a good man but the world didn't treat you well. I never understood his change of heart. Maybe he knew deep down in his heart, although the harsh words never stopped coming from him (Lamwaka, 2013, p.163).

The narrator's father had no problem with Lugul's intersexuality yet "harsh words", were used to defend socio-cultural norms of this society. Throughout the story, Lamwaka creates a feeling of silence that is echoed in Lugul's characterisation. This feeling of silence suggests the hardships and insults that individuals who unconsciously perform genders and sexualities are subjected to in the heterosexual societies. Like Kenani and de Nyeko, Lamwaka subtly but powerfully undermines homophobic tendencies through deft characterisation. In the next section I turn to symbolism.

Naming, Bodies and Fruits as Symbols of Queer Sexualities

Literary symbols signify an object or event which on its own signifies something else (Abrams, 1999, p.311). According to Gill (1995), "symbols are important if they work alongside characters" (p.192). The term symbolism is "generally employed either when there is a set or cluster of images of a similar kind in a literary work, or when the image is used on an extended scale to represent a complex meaning" (Brett 1965, p.29). Symbols that have been employed in

Kenani's "Love on Trial" and "In the Best Interests of the Child" are embedded in the cultures of his socio-cultural context of Malawi just as de Nyeko and Lamwaka of Uganda do in "Jambula Tree" and "Chief of the Home", respectively. My observation with regard to symbolism is that naming of characters, bodies of characters and fruits have been used to evoke images of homoerotic desires that are repressed by cultural dictates of the dominant heterosexual populace.

Kenani uses symbolism as a tool to familiarise what is largely regarded as strange within the Malawian cultural context. In both "Love on Trial" and "In the Best Interests of the Child", the symbolism is mainly tied to onomastic significance, regarding the character's names. In other words, Kenani's choice of names in these two stories is not arbitrary, but bears symbolic significance for the events in the narrative. This is particularly the case when the Chichewa names are translated into English. One such name is Charles Chikwanje, whose surname refers to a panga knife, a tool used for cutting. In relation to Charles's role in the story, the name becomes significant because Charles acts like a panga knife that cuts open what the heterosexual populace considers to be culturally sacred. Charles's antagonist, Mr Lapani Kachingwe, also bears symbolic significance. In the vernacular, Chichewa, "Lapani" is translated as "repent". The obvious connotation of the name is that Charles needs to repent from his supposed homosexual sin. Lapani's role also seems to be to remind wayward individuals of the need to repent their sins. However, there is an alternative reading of the name. Since Charles has put a knife on "things that held" Chipiri together, Mr Lapani Kachingwe could be read as carrying a message that it is time to repent and cease suppression of alternative sexualities.

Similarly, in reading "In the Best Interests of the Child", we appreciate how naming has symbolic significance in the author's presentation of alternative sexuality, rendering gender prone to performances in a specific socio-cultural context. The naming of Sister Fire is very symbolic in the story. Locally, Sister Fire is regarded as a powerful woman who stands up to men. The name is largely associated with a popular female radio presenter in Malawi, who commanded a

lot of respect from the male society. Kenani adopts this name in order to evoke a powerful image for lesbianism. In doing so, Kenani rejects the idea that individuals with alternative sexualities are powerless. The fact that Sister Fire, in Kenani's story, is a lesbian, lends to the argument that her biological sex does not translate into a "cultural compulsion to become [a woman according to her society's expectations]" (Butler, 1990, p.11). In the case of Sister Fire, the Butlerian notion of gender performativity implies that gender identification is very fluid and beyond the suppositions of heteronormative societies (Mtenje, 2016; Msibi, 2011).

In de Nyeko's "Jambula Tree" lesbianism is symbolised as a 'forbidden fruit' because the culture in which Anyango and Sanyu live forbids it. In their analyses of the story, both Lipenga (2014) and Mtenje (2016) recognize the way the author employs fruits as symbols. Mtenje (2016) calls de Nyeko's use of the phrase "forbidden fruit" as "a biblically-redolent phrasing by the author which attests to the prejudice of a wider culture" (p.249). Against the "forbidden", the two girls promise never to adhere to such cultural restrictions. Unfortunately, "to curtail the girls' nascent forbidden sexual feelings for one another, Sanyu's parents send her to London" (Mtenje, 2016, p.249). In the African context, family is regarded as one of the ministries of culture. Family is expected to instil cultural values in its members, especially the young ones. This clearly shows that "family [can be] both an accommodating and hostile space for same-sex sexualities" (Mtenje, 2016, p.233). In this case, Sanyu's parents are hostile as they deliberately send her to London "to curtail" the desire.

The symbol of "forbidden fruit" challenges the homophobic culture in "Jambula Tree". This happens through the representation of love encounter between the two girls as meeting resistance from the heterosexual community with a justification that lesbianism is "unreachable" and "forbidden". The two girls challenge their culture as recalled in the story by Anyango that "you said it to me, as we sat on a mango tree branch. We were not allowed to climb trees, but we did, and there, inside the green branches, you said – *we can be anything*" (de Nyeko, 2013, p.10 emphasis added). As a traditional symbol, a tree symbolises "a whole created

order of nature” (Gill, 1995, p.31). The mango tree branch as represented in the story is symbolic of alternativity. The mango tree has many branches just as life has many twists. So, the two girls have chosen to take a different direction than the rest of their community. The declaration that they “can be anything” symbolises the struggle that queer characters endure to live their desired alternative sexual orientations.

In addition to the jambula tree as a symbol for the complexity of nature and consequently sexuality, its fruits have been used to symbolise same-sex love (Lipenga, 2014). Anyango recalls that “[they] were seated under the jambula tree. It had grown so tall. The tree had been there for ages with its unreachable fruit. They said it was there even before the estate houses were constructed” (de Nyeko, 2013, p.18). The “unreachable fruit” can be understood as prohibition of homosexuality. The statement that the tree had been there even before the neighbourhood was built suggests that homosexuality has been part of African culture since time immemorial as earlier noted, even before the arrival of the colonialists. Thus, “Jambula Tree” advances an argument that homosexuality has been there even before the arrival of whites as authors as Hawley (2017) and Zabus (2013) argue. Closely related to this is the case of Lugul in “Chief of the Home” where the narrator tells us that Lugul’s gender is unusual in a very conservative and culturally strict Acholi society in Uganda.

On reading Lamwaka’s “Chief of the Home”, one appreciates that the intersex protagonist Lugul has a body that can be described as feminine. Although Lugul’s origins are shrouded in mystery, his body, as a symbol, “is more than an artificial or arbitrary sign” (Brett, 1965, p.29). His body “stands for, or points to, a reality beyond itself” (Gill, 1995, p.30). Lugul performs all domestic chores. The narrator of the story is puzzled that despite all his hard work and strength, Lugul is not head of the family. The response to this question takes us to masculinity as it is understood in African context. The narrator speaks to Lugul that “my father said boys should not be close to you because you will teach them how to cook, that you didn’t know that being near the cooking fire will burn your penis” (Lamwaka

2013, p.160). This entails that Lugul is demeaned by men who surround him because he does chores that are culturally reserved for women. Nonetheless, the narrator goes on to say “whatever anyone said didn’t deter you from doing what you enjoyed most [...]. Others said you only had a *penis*, but that wasn’t enough to make you a *man*” (Lamwaka, 2013, p.160, emphasis is mine). Using Butler’s gender performativity, I argue that the fact that Lugul has a ‘penis’ does not entail that he is to be designated as a ‘man’.

Many people in the story, including the narrator’s father, suggest that Lugul is not comfortable with his manhood. From the manner in which Lugul’s body is represented in the story, one can argue that Lugul’s male sexuality does not inform his gender. The narrator addresses Lugul recalling that “a lot of people thought you were mad. Some said you were not *comfortable with your sexual manhood*” (Lamwaka, 2013, p.163, emphasis added). Interestingly, the Alokolum society is aware that Lugul’s is a non-conforming gender. This may suggest that the Alokolum people associate Lugul with another “sexualhood”. The narrator confirms this by saying that “nobody wanted to call [Lugul] a man because [he] fetched water from the well, carried firewood on [his] head” (Lamwaka, 2013, p.163). Yet, the populace disapproves Lugul’s other sexuality much as he is not conforming to the one constructed by the society. Contemporary gender studies such as those by Bertolt (2019), Kang et al (2017), Piantato (2016) and Mikkola (2008) propound that an attempt to exclusively match sexuality with gender is not only ineffectual but a failed heteronormative manifesto. The case of Lugul here reminds us of Charles’s ‘pit latrine scandal’. In “Love on Trial”, people’s interest, to know who was performing as a man and who was performing as a woman when it is explicitly stated that two men were involved in the sexual activity in the pit latrine, is acknowledgement of the persistent tendency in heteronormativity to have the man-woman binary. This argument manifests further in the stories through the viewpoints from which the stories are told, which may be a subject of discussion on its own.

Conclusion

This article has examined four short stories, Stanley Kenani’s “Love on Trial”

and “In the Best Interests of the Child”, Monica Arac de Nyeko’s “Jambula Tree” and Beatrice Lamwaka’s “Chief of the Home”, that represent gender and sexuality in Malawian and Ugandan cultural contexts. In the representation of sexuality and gender in the four short stories analysed in this article, it is evident that gender is not a fixed phenomenon and neither does it depend on biological sex. Similarly, sexuality does not depend on a prescribed gender. Instead, it is individuals’ social performances within cultural contexts that designate them as either male or female. Reading the four stories discussed in this article, we encounter characters that are deemed deviant within their socio-cultural contexts and symbols that familiarise the ‘queer’. My general observation is that characterisation and symbolism conspire to form a powerful critique of heteronormativity. Kenani, de Nyeko and Lamwaka have utilised characterisation and symbolism in order to reveal thoughts and feelings that queer characters are denied in the heterosexual majority society.

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